

ART IN THE NATIONAL CAPITOL.

S P E E C H

OF

HON. CHARLES SUMNER

IN THE

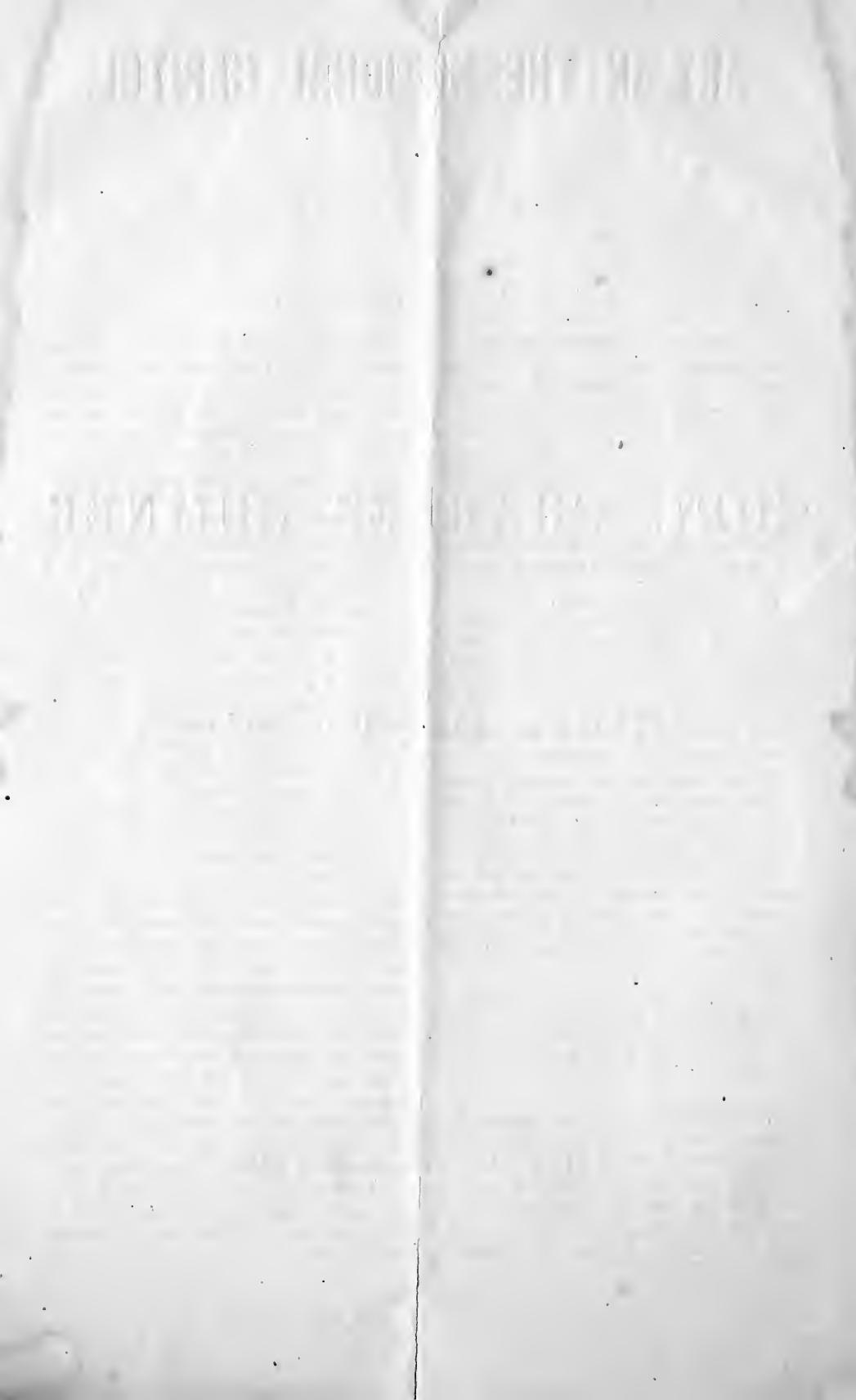
SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES,

JULY 17, 1866.

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S P E E C H .

STATUE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

Mr. WADE.—I move to take up the joint resolution (H. R. No. 197,) authorizing a contract with Vinnie Ream for a statue of Abraham Lincoln.

Mr. SUMNER.—I hope that will not be taken up. Several SENATORS.—Oh, let us vote.

Mr. SUMNER.—Senators say, "Oh, let us vote." The question is about giving away \$10,000.

Mr. CONNESS.—Taking it up is not giving money away, I hope.

Mr. SUMNER.—The question is, I say, about giving away \$10,000; that is the proposition involved in this joint resolution.

Mr. CONNESS.—For a statue.

Mr. SUMNER.—The Senator says "for a statue"—an impossible statue, I say; one which cannot be made. However, I am not going to say anything on the merits now; that will come at another time if the resolution is taken up. I ask for the yeas and nays on the question of taking up.

The question being taken by yeas and nays, resulted—yeas 26, nays 8; as follows:

YEAS.—Messrs. Anthony, Buckalew, Chandler, Conness, Cowan, Creswell, Doolittle, Foster, Guthrie, Howe, Johnson, Lane, McDougall, Nesmith, Norton, Nye, Poland, Pomeroy, Ross, Sprague, Stewart, Trumbull, Wade, Williams, Wilson, and Yates—26.

NAYS.—Messrs. Davis, Edmunds, Henderson, Howard, Kirkwood, Morgan, Riddle, and Sumner—8.

ABSENT.—Messrs. Brown, Clark, Cragin, Dixon, Fessenden, Fowler, Grimes, Harris, Hendricks, Morrell, Ramsay, Saulsbury, Sherman, Van Winkle, Willey, and Wright—16.

So the motion was agreed to; and the Senate, as in Committee of the Whole, resumed the consideration of the joint resolution (H. R. No. 197,) authorizing a contract with Vinnie Ream for a statue of Abraham Lincoln.

Mr. SUMNER.—Some evenings ago, sir, I made an attempt to secure an appropriation of \$10,000 in behalf of worthy public servants in one of the Departments of this Government. In presenting that case it was my duty to exhibit something of their necessities. I showed you how this money was needed to

enable them to meet the expenses of living, which, as we all know, have been constantly increasing, while the value of money has been decreasing. I showed you also that they had earned this money by the service they had performed. After ample discussion, running over several evenings, the Senate chose to vote down that proposition and refused outright to appropriate \$10,000 to be distributed among public servants who, as I insisted, had earned it by faithful labor. In refusing it you acted on a sentiment of economy. It was urged that at this time the Treasury was so much drawn upon that we could not make or should not be justified in making any such appropriation, and that if it were made, then we should be obliged to make it in other cases, and there would be no end to the drain upon the Treasury. You all remember the fever of economy on that occasion, and also the result. The proposition was voted down.

Now, sir, a proposition is brought forward to appropriate that identical sum of \$10,000 to be applied to the production of a work of art. I speak of it now in the most general way. If there were any assurance that the work in question could be worthy of so large a sum—if there were any reason to imagine that the favorite, who is to be the beneficiary under this resolution, were really competent to execute such a work—still, at this time and under the circumstances by which we are surrounded, I might well object to its passage, simply on reasons of economy. Surely this argument is not out of place. I present as my first objection to this proposition the consideration of economy. Do not, sir, wastefully, inconsiderately, heedlessly give away so large a sum of money. If you are in the mood of appropriation on this scale, select some of those public servants who have been discharging their laborious duties on an inadequate comi-

pensation, and bestow it upon them. Be just before you are generous. Do this rather than become such sudden patrons of art. I hope that I do not treat this question too gravely. You treated the proposition to augment the compensation of public servants in the State Department very gravely. I but follow your example.

But, sir, there is another aspect of this question to which you will pardon me if I allude. I enter upon it with great reluctance. I am unwilling to utter a word that would bear hard upon any one, least of all upon a youthful artist where sex imposes reserve, if not on her part, at least on mine; but when a proposition like this is brought forward I am bound to meet it frankly.

Each Senator of course must act on his own judgment and the evidence before him. Each must be responsible to his own conscience for the vote that he gives. Now, sir, with the little knowledge that I have of such things—with the small opportunities that I have enjoyed of observing works of art—and with the moderate acquaintance that I have formed with artists, I am bound to express a confident opinion that this candidate is not competent to produce the work which you propose to order. You might as well place her on the staff of General Grant, or put General Grant aside and place her on horseback in his stead. She cannot do it. She might as well contract to furnish an epic poem, or the draft of a bankrupt bill. I am pained to be constrained to say what I do, but when you press this to a vote you leave me no alternative. Admit that she may make a statue, she cannot make one that you will be justified in placing in this national capitol. Promise is not performance; but what she has done thus far comes under the first head rather than the latter. Surely this edifice, so beautiful and interesting, should not be opened to the rude experiment of untried talent. Only the finished artist should be admitted here.

Sir, I doubt if you consider enough the character of this edifice in which we are now assembled. Possessing the advantage of an incomparable situation, it is one of the first-class structures in the world. Surrounded by an amphitheatre of hills, with the Potomac at

its feet, it may remind you of the capitol in Rome, with the Alban and Sabine hills in sight, and with the Tiber at its feet. But the situation is grander than that of the Roman capitol. The edifice itself is not unworthy of the situation. It has beauty of form and sublimity in proportion, even if it lacks originality in conception. In itself it is a work of art. It ought not to receive in the way of ornamentation anything which is not a work of art. Unhappily this rule has been too often forgotten, or there would not be so few pictures and marbles about us which we are glad to recognize. But bad pictures and ordinary marbles should warn us against adding to their number.

Pardon me if I call your attention for one moment to the few works of art in the Capitol which we might care to preserve. Beginning with the Vice-President's room, which is nearest to us, we find an excellent and finished portrait of Washington, by Peale. This is much less known than the familiar portrait by Stuart, but it is well worthy to be cherished. I never enter the room where it is without feeling its presence. Traversing the corridors, we find ourselves in the spacious Rotunda, where are four pictures by Trumbull, truly historic in character, by which great scenes live again before us. These pictures have a merit of their own which will always justify for them the place they now occupy. Mr. Randolph, with an ignorant levity, once characterized that which represents the signing of the Declaration of Independence as a "shin-piece." He should have known that there is probably no picture, having so many portraits, less obnoxious to such a gibe. If these pictures do not belong to the highest forms of art, they can never fail to be regarded with interest by the patriot citizen, while the artist cannot be indifferent to them. There is one other picture in the Rotunda which is not without merit; I refer to the Landing of the Pilgrims, by Weir, where there is a certain beauty of color and a religious sentiment; but this picture has always seemed to me too exaggerated to be natural. Passing from the Rotunda to the Hall of the House of Representatives we stand before a picture, which,

as a work of art, is perhaps the choicest of all in the Capitol. It is the portrait of Lafayette, by that consummate artist, who was one of the glories of France, Ary Scheffer. He sympathized with our institutions; and this portrait of the early friend of our country was a present from the artist to the people of the United States. Few who look at it by the side of the Speaker's chair are aware that it is the production of the rare genius which gave to mankind the *Christus Consolator* and the *Francesca da Rimini*.

If we turn from painting to sculpture, we shall find further reason for caution. The lesson is taught especially by that work of the Italian Persico on the steps of the Capitol, called by him Columbus, but sometimes called by others, "a man rolling nine-pins," for the attitude and the ball he holds suggest this game. Near to this is a remarkable group by Greenough, where the early settler is struggling with the savage, while opposite in the yard is the statue of Washington by the same artist, which has found little favor because it is nude, but which shows a great mastery of art. There also are the works of Crawford—the alto-relievo which fills the pediment over the great door of the Senate Chamber, and the statue of Liberty which looks down from the top of the dome—attesting a genius that must always command admiration. There are other statues in the building by a living artist. Then there are the bronze doors by Rogers, on which he labored long and well. They belong to a class of which there are only a few specimens in the world, and I have sometimes thought they might vie with those famous doors at Florence, which Michael Angelo said were worthy to be the doors of Paradise. Our artist has pictured the whole life of Columbus in bronze, while the portraits of contemporary princes, and of the authors who have illustrated the life of the great discoverer, add to the completeness of this work of art.

Now, sir, the chambers of this Capitol are to open again for the reception of a work of art. It is to be a statue of our martyred President. He deserves a statue, and it should be here in Washington. But you cannot expect to have, even of him, more than one statue here in Washington. Such a repetition or reduplica-

tion would be out of place. It would be too much. There is one statue of Washington. There is also a statue of Jefferson. I refer to the bronze statue in front of the Executive Mansion by the French sculptor David. There is also one statue of Jackson. It is now proposed to add a statue of Lincoln. I suppose you do not contemplate two statues or three statues, but only one statue. Who now shall make that statue which shall find a place in the national Capitol? Surely whoever undertakes that work must be of ripe genius, with ample knowledge of art and of unquestioned capacity—the whole informed and inspired by a prevailing sympathy with the martyr and the cause for which he lived and died. Are you satisfied that this youthful candidate, without ripeness of genius or ample knowledge of art or unquestioned capacity, and not so situated as to feel the full inspiration of his life and character, should receive this remarkable trust? She has never made a statue in her life. Shall she experiment on the historic dead, and place her attempt under this dome? I am unwilling. When the statue of that beloved President is set up here, where we shall look upon it daily, and gather from it courage and consolation, I wish it to be a work of art in truth and reality, with the living features animated by the living soul, so that we shall all hail it as the man immortal by his life, now doubly immortal through art. Anything short of this, even if it finds a transient resting-place here, through your indulgence, will be removed whenever a correct taste asserts its just prerogatives.

Therefore, sir, for the sake of economy, that you may not heedlessly lavish the national treasure; for the sake of this Capitol, itself a work of art, that it may not have anything in the way of ornamentation which is not a work of art; for the sake of our martyred President, whose statue should be by a finished artist; and for the sake of art throughout the whole country, that we may not set a pernicious example, I ask you to reject this resolution. When I speak for art generally, I open a tempting theme, but I forbear. Suffice it to say that art throughout the whole country must suffer if Congress crowns with its patronage anything which is not truly artistic. By

such patronage, you will discourage where you ought to encourage.

Mr. President, I make these remarks with sincere reluctance. I am pained to feel obliged to make them; but such an appropriation as this, engineered so vigorously, and having in its support such a concerted strength, must be met plainly and directly. Do not condemn the frankness which you compel. If you wish to bestow a charity or a gift, do it openly, without pretence of any patronage of art, or pretence of any homage to a deceased President. Bring forward your resolution appropriating \$10,000 to this youthful candidate. This I can deal with. I can listen to your argument for charity, and I assure you that I shall never be insensible to it. But when you propose to pay this large sum for a work of art to be placed in the national Capitol in memory of the illustrious dead, I am obliged to consider the character of the artist you select. I wish it were otherwise, but I cannot help it.

The remarks of Mr. Sumner were opposed by Mr. Nesmith of Oregon, Mr. McDougal and Mr. Conness of California, Mr. Yates and Mr. Trumbull of Illinois, Mr. Wade of Ohio, and Mr. Cowen of Pennsylvania. In the course of the debate, Mr. Edmunds of Vermont moved an amendment, requiring that before the first instalment of \$5,000 should be paid, the model should be to "the acceptance" of the Secretary of the Interior. On this motion Mr. Sumner spoke again as follows:—

Mr. SUMNER.—I think this amendment had better be adopted. It is only a reasonable precaution in a case like the present. The Senator from Wisconsin alluded to a contract with Mr. Stone. He is a known sculptor, whose works are at the very doors of the Senate Chamber. The committee who employed him must have been perfectly aware of his character. When they entered into a contract with him, there was no element of chance; they knew what they were contracting for. But in the present case there is nothing but chance, if there be not the certainty of failure.

Mr. CONNESS.—How was it in the case of Mr. Powell?

Mr. SUMNER.—I am speaking of the present case. One at a time, if you please. The

person that you now propose to contract with, notoriously has never made a statue. All who have the most moderate acquaintance with art know that it is one thing to make a bust, and quite another thing to make a statue. One may make a bust, and yet be entirely unable to make a statue; just as one may write a poem in the corner of a newspaper, and not be able to produce an epic. A statue is one of the highest forms of art. There have been very few artists competent to make a statue. There is as yet but one instance that I can recall of a woman successful in such an undertaking. But the eminent and precocious person to whom I refer had shown a peculiar genius very early in life,—had enjoyed the rarest opportunities of culture, and had vindicated her title as artist before she attempted this difficult task. Conversing, as I sometimes have, with sculptors, I remember how they always dwell upon the difficulty of such a work. It is no small labor to set a man on his legs, with proper drapery and accessories, in stone or in bronze. Not many have been able to do it, and all these have had in advance experience in art. Now, there is no such experience here. This candidate is notoriously without it. There is no reason to suppose that she can succeed. Therefore, the Senator from Vermont [Mr. EDMUNDS,] is wise when he proposes that before the nation pays \$5,000 on account, it shall have some assurance that the work is not absolutely a failure. Voltaire was in the habit of exclaiming, in a coarse Italian saying, that "a woman cannot produce a tragedy." In the face of what has been accomplished by Miss HOSMER, I do not venture on the remark that a woman cannot produce a statue; but I am sure that, in the present case, you ought to take every reasonable precaution. Anything for this Capitol must be "above suspicion."

Sir, I did not intend when I rose to say anything except directly upon the proposition of the Senator from Vermont, but as I am on the floor perhaps I may be pardoned if I advert for one moment—

Mr. HOWE.—Will the Senator allow me to ask him one question for information?

Mr. SUMNER.—Certainly.

Mr. HOWE.—It is whether he supposes that by the examination of a plaster model he could get any assurance that the work in marble would be satisfactory.

Mr. SUMNER.—Obviously, for the chief work of the artist is in the model. When this is done, the work is more than half done. What remains requires mechanical skill rather than genius. In Italy, where there are accomplished workmen in marble, the artist leaves his model in their hands, contenting himself with a few finishing strokes of the chisel. Sometimes he does not touch the marble.

I was about to say, when interrupted, that I hoped to be pardoned if I adverted for one moment to the onslaught which has been made upon what I have said already in this debate. I do not understand it. I do not know why Senators have given such rein to the passion for personality. I made no criticism on any Senator and no allusion, even, to any Senator. I addressed myself directly to the question and endeavored to treat it with all the reserve consistent with a proper frankness. Senators, one after another, have attacked me personally. The Senator from Oregon, [Mr. NESMITH,] seemed to riot in this business. The Senator from California, [Mr. CONNESS,] from whom I had reason to expect something better, caught the spirit of the other Pacific Senator. Sir, there was nothing in what I said to justify such an attack. But I will not proceed in the comments which their speeches invite. I turn away from them. There was, however, one remark of the Senator from Oregon to which I will refer. He complained that I was unwilling to patronize native art, and that I had dwelt on the productions of foreign artists to the disparagement of our own artists.

I am at a loss for the motive of this singular misrepresentation. Let the Senator quote a sentence or a word which fell from me in disparagement of native art. He cannot. I know the art of my country too well and think of it with too much of patriotic pride. I alluded to only one foreign artist, and he was that sympathetic and gifted Frenchman who has endowed the Capitol with the portrait of Lafayette. The other artists that I praised were all of my own country. There was Peele, of Philadelphia, to whom we are

indebted for the portrait of Washington. There was Trumbull, the companion of Washington, and one of his military staff, who, quitting the toils of war, gave himself to painting, under the inspiration of West, himself an American, and produced these works which I pronounced the chief treasure of the Rotunda. There also was Greenough, the earliest American sculptor, and, until Story took the chisel, unquestionably the most accomplished of all in the list of American sculptors. He was a scholar, versed in the languages of antiquity and modern times, who studied the art which he practised in the literature of every tongue. Of him I never fail to speak in praise. There also was Crawford, an American sculptor, born in New York, and my own intimate personal friend, whose early triumphs I witnessed and enjoyed. He was a true genius, versatile, fertile, bold. His short life was crowned by the honors of his profession, and he was hailed at home and abroad as a great sculptor. How can I speak of this friend of my early life except with admiration and love. I alluded also to Rogers, an American artist—from the West; yes, sir, from the West—

Mr. HOWARD.—Who was educated in Michigan.

Mr. SUMNER.—And, as the Senator says, educated in Michigan, who has given to his country and to art those bronze doors, which I did not hesitate to compare with the immortal doors of Ghiberti in the Baptistry of Florence. These, sir, were the artists to whom I referred, and such was the spirit in which I spoke. How, then, can any Senator undertake to say that I had praised foreign artists at the expense of the artists of my own country? The remark, permit me to say, is absolutely without foundation.

It is because I would not have the art of my own country suffer, and because I would have its honors follow merit, that I oppose the largess you propose. If you really wish to set up a statue of our martyred President, select one of the acknowledged sculptors of your own country. Do not go to a foreigner, and do not go to the unknown. There are sculptors born among us and already famous. Take one of them. There is Powers, an artist of rarest skill with the chisel; of exqui-

site finish; perhaps with less of variety and freshness than some other artists; perhaps with less of originality; but having in himself many and peculiar characteristics as a remarkable artist. Summon him to the work. He has been tried. In making a contract with him you know in advance, that you will have a statue not entirely unworthy of the appropriation you are about to make, or of the place where it is to stand.

There also is another sculptor of our country, whom I should name first of all if I were called to express freely my unbiased choice; I mean Story. He is the son of the great jurist, and began life with his father's mantle resting upon him. His works of jurisprudence are quoted daily in your courts. He is also a man of letters. His contributions to literature in prose and verse are in your libraries. To these he now adds unquestioned fame as a sculptor. In the great exhibitions of Europe his Cleopatra and his Saul have been recognized as equal in art to the best of our time, and, in the opinion of many, as better than the best. He brings to sculpture not only the genius of an artist, but scholarship, literature, study, and talent of every kind. Summon him to the work. Let his name be associated with the Capitol by a statue which I am sure will be a source of national pride and honor.

I might mention other sculptors of our country. My friend who sits beside me, the distinguished Senator from New York, [Mr. MORGAN,] very properly reminds me of the sculptor who has done so much honor to his own State. Palmer has a beautiful genius, which he has cultivated for many years with sedulous care. He has experience. The seal of success has been set upon his works. Let him make your statue. There is still another artist, whose home is New York, whom I would not forget; I refer to Brown, the author of the equestrian statue of Washington in New York. Of all the equestrian statues in our country that is the best, unless Crawford's statue at Richmond is its rival. It need not shrink from comparison with equestrian statues in the Old World. The talent that could seat the great chief so easily in that bronze saddle ought to find a welcome in this Capitol. There are yet other sculptors that I might name; but I confine my enumeration to those who have done something more than give promise of excellence. And now you turn from all this native talent, which has done so much and become already famous, to offer a difficult and honorable duty to an untried person, whose friends can claim for her nothing more than the uncertain promise of such excellence in sculpture as is consistent with the condition of her sex. Sir, I will not say anything more.

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